

# Writing to Learn

## Definition

Writing to learn is a strategy through which students can develop their ideas, their critical thinking ability and their writing skills. Writing to learn enables students to experiment every day with written language and increase their fluency and mastery of written conventions. Writing to learn can also be used as formative assessment and as a way to scaffold mid- and high- stakes writing assignments and tests.

## Advantages

- Helps students to “think out loud” and reflect on content
- Develops expressive language skills and fluency
- Helps students to process information
- Activates student voice
- Leads to improving the quality of high-stakes writing
- Produces lots of generative writing
- Takes between eight and ten minutes to execute

## Actually, it ...

- Continues to make student writing clear and personal
- Helps the facilitator understand what students know and don’t know
- Should be included as an integral part of daily lesson planning
- Develops critical thinking skills
- Scaffolds to high-stakes writing assignments

## Academic Benefits of Low-stakes Writing

- To help students stay involved in the course
- To improve students’ high stakes writing
- To help out commenting
- To help students be active learners
- To help students find their own language for the issues of the course
- To help students be more adventuresome and questioning
- To help us understand how our students are learning
- to help students learn to write with full attention to their thinking
- To help students learn meta-cognitive thinking
- To help students learn to talk to themselves
- Low-stakes writing takes little of our time and expertise

## Degrees of Response to Writing

- No Response: private writing
- Sharing but no feedback
- Peer feedback or student response groups
- About Teacher Responses or Comments

# Examples of Writing to Think & Learn

## 1. In-Class Writing via a Mobile Device:

- 8 minutes of writing at the start of class to help students bring to mind their homework reading or lab work or previous lectures.
- 8 minutes in mid class when things go dead--or to get students to think about an important question that has come up.
- 8 minutes at the end of class or lecture to get them to think about what's been discussed.
- 5 minutes at the end of class to write to us about what they learned that day: what was the main idea for them, what was going on for them during that class. Not only will this help them integrate and internalize the course material; it helps our teaching by showing us what's getting through and what isn't.

## 2. Journal Writing:

The goal is to get students to connect what they are studying with the rest of their experience, thoughts, and feelings.

- Penzu is a free **online diary** and personal journal focused on privacy. Easily keep a secret diary or a private journal of notes and ideas securely on the web.
- [www.my-diary.org/](http://www.my-diary.org/) - Everyone can have their free personal **diary** or **journal** at my-diary.org - Choose to have your **diary** private or public.

## 3. Think Pieces:

Think pieces are a productive and provide a way to specify an intellectual task for students to engage in before class: e.g., compare two concepts from the reading; compare a concept from the reading to some experience from their lives; work out a definition.

- Have a Google Doc template that is compare/contrast, or with a Venn Diagram where they can write opposing viewpoints.

## 4. Essays That Count -- To Demonstrate Learning:

Genuine essays must be well revised: clearly written, coherently organized, carefully copy-edited, and typed. When students understand that they are being asked for two very different kinds of writing in the course, their essays get better because of their extensive practice with low stakes think pieces, and their low stakes writing gets more thoughtful when they experience it as practice for the high stakes essays (*and relief from them too*).

- [Noredink.com](http://Noredink.com)

## 5. The Believing Game and The Doubting Game:

Write briefly in support of an idea, concept, methodology, thesis and then in opposition to it. As students complete this activity based on a course reading or a controversy in the field, they become more adept at understanding the complexity of issues and arguments.

- By using Google Moderator, the teacher can post a topic and students can write about it and explain their arguments as well as defend them and vote on topics which need to be discussed.

## 6. E-Portfolios:

Students usually get much more out of a course when they are asked to go through all their writing and other projects and make a portfolio out of the best and most interesting pieces. The most important part of the portfolio is an essay that introduces, explores, and explains the pieces in the portfolio and talks about what the student has learned from these pieces of work. This self-reflexive writing provides a kind of meta-discourse that leads to new understanding and enriches fragile, incipient insights

- Electronic portfolios can be created in almost any program. [EduBlogs](http://EduBlogs) is a student forum to create Student e-Portfolios; however any website, blog spot or wiki can be used.

## 7. Analyzing the Process: This helps students that get lost when a teacher explains how something happens. Students can write the steps either while or after they complete the steps. Students can work together on the steps if necessary. Teachers

and peer tutors can also see where misunderstandings occur by viewing the written steps.

- Students take Carnell notes via collaborative tools like Dropbox or Google Docs and share their writing. All students have access to the notes taken along with questions that have come up from other students.
- Google Moderator is another tool where students vote on topics and questions the teacher needs to explain.
- By creating a discussion board for the class on a topic or a generic discussion board, students can post their understanding of concepts and other students write to each other gaining knowledge and understanding.

8. The Problem Statement: After introducing a new concept, ask student to write out a theoretical or practical problem that the concept can help solve. They can exchange problems and write solutions, thus ensuring that they understand the concept fully.

- Using a computer lab, tablets, or any device, students write in round robin fashion and exchange devices or change chairs as they exchange documents; thus allowing them to write or comment on each other's problems and help create solutions.

9. Solving Real Problems:

Ask individuals or groups to analyze a real problem – gleaned from industry reports, scientific journals, personal experience, management practices, legal issues, etc. Students must write about the problem and a solution to implement.

- This can be approached like the problem statement above, or it can be turned in via noredink.com. Another approach is for students to use Google docs and implementing any of the above strategies along with this one.